In New England, the transcendentalists had a heavy influence on those who read their writings, those with whom they interacted, and certainly their fellow writers. One of the major concerns of that group was the fact that the United States was going in a different direction, one away from nature, from introspection, from self-reliance, from open space to one geared toward material goods and profit. This is the world in which Bartleby, the protagonist in Herman Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener*, finds himself and the fact that he ends up at the end of the story in prison, surrounded by walls, choosing to die in front of one during his short time at the tombs comes as little surprise to the reader; *Bartleby the Scrivener*, after all, is a story about walls, about confinement, about limitations, about lack of opportunity, about Wall Street and the people who make money there. It’s about those who create and sustain those walls at the expense of those whom they employ in making their profit. The story is also an attempt by Melville to reconcile the tension between the transcendentalists and, for lack of a better term, the anti-transcendentalists, those Americans who, through profit and incentive, are more invested in moving the country forward materialistically. Both Bartleby and the narrator of the story find themselves enveloped in the question of what the cost of that movement is on certain individuals.

Casual readers may ask about Bartleby’s state of mind. Is he depressed? Is he not sane? And the answer to both is yes, but it’s more complicated than that. What these readers fail to comprehend fully (with respect) is that some Americans, like Bartleby, would actually prefer not to be walled in by forces outside their own control. They would prefer not to perform meaningless tasks for those who are making money off their labor; they would prefer not to be walled into a small office with artificial light, and they would prefer not to be told what to do. These people—these Bartlebys, are driven to the wall in frustration of their plight and Bartleby in this story actually becomes part of it as he has, through his experience in the city and in the office, lost his humanity. David Kuebrick calls these walls

natural facts which suggest social and psychological facts: the densely developed urban setting that separates the story’s characters from nature; the growing impersonality not only of the workplace but of the larger society; the barriers to job advancement and social mobility that lock the copyists into their positions as poorly paid wage-earners; the social divisions that separate the capitalist elite, the middle class represented by the lawyer…and utilitarian assumptions that alienate the lawyer not only from his workers but from his deepest self. (386)
In New York City at that time, Bartleby represents the extreme, no doubt, but it's only Melville's response to the influence of the transcendentalists of the time. The scrivener's behavior is perverse, but it's the way he chooses to cope in the milieu in which he has found himself. Melville, through the character of Bartleby, emphasizes a number of things, the foremost being that walls are constructed, and even foisted upon those who are not immersed, and perhaps do not believe in the money exchange that defines Wall Street, or the type of work that must be accomplished by those without the power or influence to make that money. He also addresses employee–employer relationships, “relatively new for the United States, where many people had been independent farmers and self-employed craftsmen” and how they were having a negative impact on individuals as “more and more people ceased to be able to act on their preferences in the workplace. In their new status as hired hands: their time was not their own” (Adler 470).

In this paper, I will address what confines Bartleby, the money that surrounds him, the work he is asked to do by the narrator, his own preferences, and how the other copyists, through their respective perverse actions, are in a similar but more passive protest. I will also look at the essay “Self-Reliance” by Ralph Waldo Emerson as this transcendental text serves as a treatise that can help to explain what ails both Bartleby and the narrator. It is the notion of self-reliance of which Emerson speaks that is a major part of the tension in the story as, through their respective experiences on Wall Street, the notion of the transcendental life has escaped these characters and each in his own way is in a quest to reconcile it. Bartleby is seen as passive by many readers, but I argue the opposite as he shows a progression of action toward what finally leads him to his connection to the wall at the tombs at the end of the story. He becomes part of the wall, giving into it entirely and coming to prefer it over anything else that is going on around him. What brings him there? Three things: the work he does, the money that surrounds him to which he has little to no access and, of course, the walls themselves, of the office, of the city, then of the tombs. In the end, what confines him defines him.

The Work

Bartleby is a scrivener, one who makes copies by hand of legal documents, sometimes one hundred pages or more in length. The narrator himself calls the copying and examining of these documents “a very dull, wearisome, and lethargic affair” (Melville 9), and that when performing the work the copyists’ eyes are “dull and glazed” (21). Robin West calls the work the men do, “deadening, spirit-murdering employment” and argues that it is “surely injurious” physically and mentally (West 209). It is work that demands a sort of literacy certainly, but mostly the ability to endure the drudgery of it. It is slow and methodical, yet the narrator, a lawyer and denizen of Wall Street in his “haste” demands of Bartleby and his fellow copyists “instant compliance” to his requests and to the work at hand (Melville 10). The work is in direct contrast to work that has historically taken place in the United States, work that, one could argue, is more in line with Bartleby’s nature. Adler writes:
The farmer works in direct contact with the life of plants and animals. There is no trace of this contact in factory work, and certainly none in the occupations of merchant, banker, and lawyer who are not only remote from the life of nature but are even several steps removed from the production of material products of any kind. (471)

Bartleby is employed in a place that is contrary to his own nature and now finds himself walled into it.

Engaged at first in the work at hand, it doesn’t take long for Bartleby to lose interest in his vocation; his work lessens, ending in a direct protest to the demands as Bartleby eventually informs the lawyer, to his astonishment, that he would prefer against doing the work at all. Bartleby’s colleagues, Turkey and Nippers, while they complain bitterly about the unfairness of Bartleby’s being kept in the office and not fired, are in a more subtle protest themselves as each only gives to the office a half day’s work. Emerson writes, “for nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure,” and these men are indeed displeased with their fellow scrivener, but in the work no happier than Bartleby; they simply have given in to their situation, perhaps lacking in the type of perverse courage that Bartleby has to just stop doing it. Writing of employees like Turkey and Nippers, Emerson is “ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions” (3).

Additionally, these fellow copyists of Bartleby are never given proper names throughout the story, and while their nicknames were “mutually conferred upon each other”, it is relevant to note that the lawyer never gives them a proper identity; rather, he explains briefly why it is that they have earned their respective monikers, which are silly and somewhat demeaning. Turkey, perfectly productive in the morning, becomes a different person in the afternoon as his face “blazed like a grate full of Christmas coals; and continued blazing—but, as it were, with a gradual wane—till six o’clock” (Melville 5). Is he entirely upset and in rage? Has he been drinking during the lunch hour? Regardless of either, he is no longer productive, is in fact “slightly rash with his tongue insolent...reckless and...noisy” (7). “At such times, too, his face flamed with augmented blazonry, as if cannel coal had been heaped on anthracite” (5). He remains in this state until there is a “gradual wane” of his countenance, which comes as no coincidence as it is clearly because he is leaving the work behind. What bothers the lawyer is not so much that Turkey is useless in the afternoon, but that “his clothes were apt to look oily, and smell of eating houses....his coats were execrable, his hat not to be handled” (7). This speaks to a few things concerning Turkey: his lack of the proper income in order to clothe himself professionally and also the lawyer’s distaste for the working class. Turkey’s boss even offers to buy him a proper coat, but notes that the old copyist “was a man whom prosperity harmed” (7). A curious statement, but one that may speak to the fact that Turkey, never having known any kind of wealth, has no idea how to approach the possibility of it. The narrator comments on it, noting that Turkey was:

...a reproach to me. Concerning his coats, I reasoned with him, but with
no effect. The truth was, I suppose, that a man with so small an income could not afford to sport such a lustrous face and a lustrous coat at one and the same time. (7)

The lawyer and Turkey are similar in age, but Turkey remains a “reproach” to him, a reminder of what the lawyer is demanding of his contemporary and the affect it is having on his soul.

Nippers is younger, “a whiskered, sallow, and upon the whole rather piratical looking young man” (6). He too only gives a half a day’s work; unlike Turkey, in the morning Nippers is unproductive, then becomes more so in the afternoon. Suffering from “two evil powers—ambition and indigestion,” the reader wonders whether or not Nippers too has taken to drink and come into work with a hangover. His early conduct is inappropriate to the work at hand and a distraction to anyone around him. He would “spread his arms wide apart, seize the whole desk, and move it, and jerk it, with a grim, grinding motion on the floor, as if the table were a perverse voluntary agent, intent on thwarting and vexing him” (8). This is his protest, his only control over the situation and the narrator comments that “if Nippers wanted anything, it was to be rid of a scrivener’s table altogether” (6). And that is truth. He does show some ambition, but it is outside the confines of the work he is supposed to be doing. Nippers is often “receiving visits from certain ambiguous-looking fellows in seedy coats, whom he called his clients” (6). It is not entirely made clear what business he is conducting on the side, but what is clear is that he is involved in something bordering on criminality. He does so, we are to surmise, because of the low wage he makes as a laborer on Wall Street. Nippers too has little access to the money being made on Wall Street. He too is walled in by the limitations.

The other employee is a child, Ginger Nut, and at twelve years of age he is given over to the lawyer by his father, “a carman, ambitious of seeing his son on the bench instead of a cart before he died” in the hope that the adolescent can reach for greater things (8). It’s not clear what type of work Ginger Nut does, but he is referred to as a “student of law, errand boy, cleaner and sweeper” who earns one dollar a week (8). The others, Bartleby included, use him as a “cake and apple purveyor”, a delivery boy, and it is easy to assume that he is on the same path as the copyists as there is no indication of any kind of meaningful task to which he attends. These descriptions of the men, of Ginger Nut, and the respective behaviors that surround Bartleby each day (they also are required to work on Saturdays), show all of them to be defeated and unhappy. Emerson writes that “discontent is the want of self-reliance; it is infirmity of will” (13). They are all imprisoned by the work that walls them in, acting in perverse ways and so blatantly unhappy in the work that they do. Anyone can see it, but the lawyer is in denial of it.

When the lawyer finally asks why Bartleby would not perform his tasks any more, the scrivener replies, “do you not see the reason for yourself?” (21). Kuebrich notes that
the narrator’s casual attitude toward Turkey’s drinking and Nipper’s irritability discloses his unwitting predisposition to attribute the emotional and physical distresses of his employees to moral deficiencies and natural causes than the emotional toll of their working conditions (Kuebrich 392).

I agree with Kuebrich but do not believe the lawyer is “unwitting;” rather, he is in a convenient denial, blaming it on them rather than the work he is assigning them, and while we are in accord that Melville “wanted to show how the lawyer’s mental and moral imprisonment” affects his own decision making, there is no doubt that he embodies the tension between transcendentalism and Wall Street ideology (404 Kuebrich). The lawyer knows what is happening around him, but values his own financial gain too much to admit it. Robin West calls the work he asks the scriveners to do, “uncompensated suffering” and makes reference to the “sufferings of daily life that are......denied, trivialized, disguised” and are the byproduct of “institutions, social systems, and structures of belief which overwhelmingly serve the interests of powerful individuals, groups, or subcommittees” (West 204). Her angle is how “employees in certain kinds of labor markets bear the brunt of the pain of alienating and commodifying the products of labor” (West 204). The lawyer, through his philanthropic efforts toward Bartleby, through his patience with the half-time work ethic of his other employees, knows the effect of the work he is asking them to do. He is caught in the middle of the demeaning work that helps keep the motor of Wall Street running while simultaneously walling in those who perform it. Despite his attempts to placate Bartleby, “even the best of employers will subordinate humanitarian concerns to considerations of profit “ (Kuebrich 401).

Money

Although the reader never gets to see money exchanged in the story, the value of it is expressed widely throughout. The lawyer admits to being “a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best“ (Melville 3). Previously employed as a Master in Chancery, he defined it as “not an arduous office, but very pleasantly remunerative” (4). In making mention a few times of the fact that the lawyer was once associated with John Jacob Astor, saying that “his name rings unto bullion,” Melville’s inclusion of Astor in the story is important as it shows the tension that Melville is feeling between the material wealth of Wall Street and the artist. Mario D’Avanzo talks about this tension, noting that as a codicil to Astor’s will, which funded the Astor Library, Astor wanted it noted that the library would “contribute to the advancement of useful knowledge and the general good of society” (D’Avanzo 259). Astor, extremely wealthy, but having, according to D’Avanzo, little “poetic enthusiasm” or the “interior creative life that has to do with beauty and truth” feels invested in making the opportunity available for others who may be in possession of what he himself lacks (260). Melville,
by specifying Astor, shows the plight of the lawyer as the work he demands of his employees, work that creates “frustration, isolation and [for Bartleby] finally suicide”, while it may be useful to making profit, is hardly poetic. The lawyer compensates, like Astor, by being charitable to Bartleby, who it can be argued is by nature a poetic man? walled away from anything resembling beauty and truth. Astor then, as the archetype of wealth, but also one who values the artist, is the perfect choice to represent that tension (261).

The lawyer’s present form of employment, in which he does “a snug business among rich men’s bonds, and mortgages and title deeds,” he calls “proverbially energetic and nervous even to turbulence” (Melville 4). But it does not seem to faze him. All the stress is on Turkey, Nippers, and Bartleby, those who are required to perform the tedious work that makes him (and others) outside the walls more wealthy. The lawyer goes on to say about the stress that “nothing of that sort have I ever suffered to invade my peace” (5). It is clear that he does not fully understand the plight of his struggling scriveners, all of whom are acting in perverse ways because of what they are being asked to do and the environment in which they find themselves. They are undoubtedly dependable and consistent, but “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds” and, “with consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do” (Emerson 5). The tension increases when the narrator chooses to keep Bartleby in the office despite the fact the scrivener is no longer helping him to make money. Ridiculed by the lawyer’s professional colleagues who enter into the workplace and make “sinister observations” about Bartleby, the lawyer’s charity is questioned by those who can’t relate to his difficulty in ridding himself of the unproductive employee. The lawyer notes that “it often is that the constant friction of illiberal minds wears out at last the best resolves of the more generous” (Melville 26), and it comes to pass as finally, in a moment of frustration to which most readers can relate, the real tension of the matter rears itself when he asks of Bartleby what “earthly right do you have to stay here? Do you pay any rent? Do you pay my taxes? Or is this property yours?” (24). The lawyer (and the reader) have “to discover for [themselves] to just what lengths he is willing to go to guarantee the free individuality of a person who has no contribution to make” (Norman 24). Bartleby’s resistance then “exposes human shortcomings, [and] his persistence reveals man stubbornly laying claim to his humanity” (39).

The Walls

First described as “pallidly neat, pitifully respectable, incurably forlorn,” one does not enter into a study of his character without knowing that Bartleby is an unhappy man (Melville 9). What brought the scrivener into this state is never stated unequivocally, but what is certain is that the work, the environment, and the walls that he encounters send the scrivener spiraling downward. He gets much worse as the tale unfolds. The newly hired scrivener Bartleby is very productive at first--throughout the day. The lawyer notes that while his “eccentricities are involuntary” that he is “useful” to him (13). But the more time
Bartleby spends there, the less work he performs until he simply stops completely, preferring to do no work at all. It is a gradual matter, but once Bartleby makes the decision, he is “leanly composed; his gray eyes dimly calm” (10). It is at this point that Bartleby is most challenging to the narrator’s conscience and to the tension between transcendentalism and the realities of Wall Street. In his repeated refusals to perform the required work, his colleagues become increasingly irritated as they are being required to become more productive in response, it being how money is made on Wall Street. When finally given options for other types of employment, Bartleby claims that he is “not particular,” but in fact he is: “The reason is this: His dissatisfaction is not directed specifically at the lawyer and would not be resolved by his personally finding a more comfortable position. Any job on Wall Street would also be defined by the terms of the wage system, and Bartleby’s protest is against the system itself” (Kuebrich 400). It is at this point in the story that Bartleby becomes a different kind of commodity for the lawyer, who decides, that despite the fact that he is “repulsed by this lean, penniless wight—my hired clerk”, that he will keep him on as, through Bartleby, he can “cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval” that will “prove a sweet morsel for [his] conscience, and “cost [him] little or nothing” (13). Even this forlorn man who, over time has declined into becoming “cadaverously gentlemanly” has been dehumanized, turned into a commodity of conscience (16). It is Bartleby that will ease the tension between what the transcendentalists are espousing and the contrasting view of Wall Street for the lawyer. By the end, after the scrivener is finally terminated, asked and then forced to leave the premises, the workplace that has become his home and self-imposed prison, the lawyer realizes that “money has no effect on [Bartleby], property has no effect,” but he is misguided, for it is those things which have put the scrivener into this state (23). In a last desperate attempt to understand what type of employment the queer man prefers, Bartleby replies thusly, saying it all, telling the narrator that he likes “to be stationary” (30). He has become, through the work and all that surrounds him, a wall. And he prefers it.

The walls in Manhattan are seemingly inescapable, and there is no doubt that it has a negative effect on Bartleby as—even in the office, he finds himself situated in a place that is anti-transcendental. There is no direct sunlight, and the lawyer calls the view “rather tame than otherwise, deficient in what landscape painters call “life:” The office contains very little life and—in fact, evidently sucks it out of most who will not buy into the work there. Even the lawyer “was not a fully free man in his own office. He, like his clerks, was imprisoned by its walls” (Kuebrich 473). But for one of Bartleby’s nature the view is even worse as he is:

... close up to a small side window in that part of the room, a window which originally had afforded a lateral view of certain grimy back yards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light. Within three feet of the panes was a wall, and the light came down from far above, between two lofty buildings, as from a very small opening in a dome. (Melville 9)
The lawyer walls him in doubly by procuring a “a high green folding screen which might entirely isolate Bartleby from [his] sight, though not remove him from my voice.” Bartleby is in essence, walled in by walls. There is nowhere to go, and his ensuing behavior indicates his loss of humanity in the way he identifies with everything that surrounds him as, “for long periods he would stand looking out at his pale window behind the screen, upon the dead brick wall” (9). Additionally, when clients came into the office, Bartleby would “remain standing immoveable in the middle of the room” (26). The lawyer, in a moment borne of the frustration of a completely unproductive and immobile employee (and perhaps a nod to Poe) gives some consideration to letting “him live and die here, and then mason up his remains in the wall” (27). Though the lawyer would not be entirely surprised in getting no resistance from Bartleby at this point in the story, he may be a bit shocked to know that it becomes Bartleby’s preference in the end.

**Emerson**

The tension among all those in the copying office is palpable and inevitable given the time period in which the story is set. Emerson says:

> A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace. It is a deliverance which does not deliver. In the attempt his genius deserts him; no muse befriends; no invention, no hope. (2)

And it seems to be the case for all of them. No one more so than Bartleby, but it is ironic that in his struggle against the walls and work of New York, the scrivener seems to be acting out much of what Emerson espouses. His actions throughout the story denote the fact that he is discriminating between the voluntary acts of his mind, and his involuntary perceptions, and knows that to his involuntary perceptions a perfect faith is due. He may err in the expression of them, but he knows that these things are so, like day and night, not to be disputed. (9)

His behavior, while perverse to the lawyer (and many readers) is, in Emersonian terms, not surprising, and it is the walls of New York, the work of Wall Street, of the tombs that force him into his final place of peace. He has no choice but to continue in his resistance to all that is around him even if it lands him in the tombs as “no law can be sacred to [him] but that of [his] nature… the only right is what is after [his] constitution, the only wrong what is against it” (Emerson 3).

And so the protagonist becomes truly confined, and it is then when we see the height of tension for Melville in his pursuit of reconciling transcendentalism and it is the lawyer who becomes a man whose character has been molded by his occupation, which involves the pursuit of money and subservience to men of great wealth. On the other hand, he has been influenced by his own nature and
religious upbringing. He can sympathize with the plight of others less fortunate than himself, and will perform charitable acts. (Adler 472)

He is the anti-transcendentalist, transcendentalist, the man who cannot reconcile the choices he has made and how they have affected this human being who now resides in the tomb. Putting an Emersonian, positive spin on Bartleby’s plight, the following transpires between the lawyer and the confined scrivener:

“It was not I that brought you here, Bartleby,” said I, keenly pained at his implied suspicion, “And, to you, this should not be so vile a place. Nothing reproachful attaches to you by being here. And see, it is not so sad a place as one might think. Look, there is the sky, and here is the grass.” (Melville 31)

In saying the above, the narrator accomplishes a great deal. He distances himself from the victim, exhibits his own pain at the notion of being the cause of the misery and finally puts the situation, as Emerson would, in its greatest light. Here is prison, but there is the air and the sky! All is well! It is a ridiculous wish for the lawyer as the two cannot reconcile and Bartleby will not have it. He replies curtly, “I know where I am,” and he does. As the lawyer leaves, he slips “some silver into the grubman’s hands” asking him to “give particular attention to my friend there” and in doing so thinks it to be a charitable act (32). The lawyer here truly proves himself to be “a divided man . . . [whose] fraternal and charitable inclinations are in conflict with his business-oriented inclinations” (Adler 472).

And so the reader finds Bartleby in a jail in which he is permitted “to wander about.…especially in the enclosed grass-platted yards there-of” (Melville 31). At the end of the tale, it becomes his preference—to give into it, to become part of it. The narrator finds Bartleby in the courtyard of the tombs “strangely huddled at the base of the wall, his knees drawn up and lying on his side, his head touching the cold stones” (33). He is in a fetal position, and the walls that have confined him from his true nature are now part of him as he has given way to that reality. Toward the end of Emerson’s “Self-Reliance”, he notes that “nothing can bring you peace but yourself,” that “nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles” (15). That is the story of Bartleby the Scrivener, for in his own perverse manner he takes principled control of a system that has walled him in, given him no way out but the way he prefers. His death is on his own terms and finally, having left work that stifles him, in a city that confines and then in a place that defines confinement—the tombs, Bartleby finds his peace.
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